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Guilty Pleasures of Pop Culture

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The Patriarchal Grasp on the Music Industry and the Implications of Taylor Swift

Taylor Swift's decision to re-record and re-release her first six albums represents a complicated attempt to flee the patriarchal grasp and restructure the music industry in such a way that artists own not only their blood, sweat, and tears, but also their voices. In June of 2019, Taylor Swift made the world aware of the unprecedented reality at that time in her life. The ownership of Taylor's first six albums, namely "Taylor Swift," "Fearless," "Speak Now," "Red," "1989," and "Reputation," which were originally recorded with Scott Borchetta's Big Machine Records, had been sold by Borchetta. However, not only was her music sold, but Taylor was denied the opportunity to personally purchase the masters of her music and it was instead sold to Scooter Braun, along with the record label for approximately \$300M, with her music catalog responsible for half of that value.

Although this may be viewed as just another business transaction among the rich and powerful, it was much more nuanced than it seemed superficially. This sale demonstrated the patriarchal dominance of the music industry and the grasp that the men in higher positions within the industry think they have over the work of artists, and the artists themselves by extension. However, Swift decided to re-record and re-release those albums that were sold, and this essay explores the implications of that process through Swift's successes, the actions of other artists, and the retaliation by record labels.

Superficially, the music industry would likely not be regarded by most individuals as an industry that is dominated by men. This is likely due to the prominence and undeniable success of a multitude of female artists. However, when one takes a closer look at the demographics of the individuals who manage these artists, the male dominance is indisputable. Research has revealed that, of the thirteen most prominent record labels in the United States, eleven are run by men and only one is fully run by a woman, with the other being simply co-ran by a woman (Ingam). Therefore, one can easily recognize the disparity that exists within the industry. This can have a rather severe impact on artists, especially female artists given the existence of a society that sees little value in their efforts and one example of this is the conflict between Taylor Swift and Scott Borchetta.

The solidarity that was shown to Taylor Swift as she made her story known to others in the industry and her fans was possibly quite unprecedented by, and surprising to, the individuals at Big Machine Records, as well as throughout the industry. As Taylor's fellow artists within the record label learned about her situation, several of them, including Ariana Grande and Demi Lovato, who are two indubitably successful female artists, decided to part ways with the label. Additionally, to reclaim her discography, her artistic freedom, and her voice, Taylor embarked on a journey to re-record her first six albums. The success of these newly released versions of her albums, which bear the attachment "Taylor's Version" in their titles, as well as the situation that Taylor endured with Borchetta and Braun has had tremendous implications throughout the music industry at several levels. Furthermore, Taylor embarked on a worldwide tour that celebrates the ten different eras of her music, and its immeasurable success is one that the industry had never seen before. When discussing the success of Swift after her decision to reclaim her music, one recent Forbes magazine article very clearly explains:

The pop star's efforts greatly paid off. *Forbes* named Swift a billionaire in October 2023. A whopping \$500 million of Swift's fortune derived from music royalties and touring, while another \$500 million came from the rising value of her music catalog. This makes Swift one of the only musicians to earn her billion-dollar fortune through music alone.

(Mercuri)

Therefore, such tremendous success elucidates the impact of a decision that was made out of simultaneous desperation and a desire for autonomy and acknowledgment. Swift's success demonstrates to other artists and to music industry officials a reality that they may not have anticipated on such a large scale: that even the hardest attempts at exploiting an artist or at allegedly destroying their careers can have repercussions that they could not have possibly anticipated. However, as Taylor's re-recording journey brings her well-deserved success and praise, the future of other artists also hangs in the balance because of that unprecedented level of success. It is very important to note, however, that Taylor Swift is not the first female artist to engage in this type of battle within the music industry. One article describing the sad reality for female artists in the industry brings to light the story of another artist, JoJo, stating:

JoJo entered the music scene at the tender age of 13...For many years controversy swirled around JoJo's self-titled debut album and second album 'The High Road' after she sued former label Blackground Records and its imprint Da Family Records over a dispute about her recording contract in 2009. (Harry)

Therefore, the issue of female artists owning their work and being trapped by a male-dominated industry goes beyond Taylor Swift, especially when one takes a step back and looks at the

industry as a whole and listens to the stories that may not garner the media attention in the same way that Swift's did.

As highly positioned individuals in the music industry witnessed Taylor's continued success and support despite an attempt to hinder her as an artist and a businesswoman, the things they started to do were simply unforeseen and disheartening. In direct response to the success of her re-released albums, record labels have begun the implementation within their contracts that an artist will need to wait several years after his or her contract has run its course before he or she can re-record and re-release past music if they wish to do so. In the case of Taylor Swift concerning Big Machine Records, she only had to wait about eighteen months in order to be able to start the process of re-recording her albums, which she has verbalized felt like a very long time. When discussing the amount of time that artists typically wait to re-record music, one Billboard magazine article states, "It could have been five to seven years from the release date of the original, or two years after the contract expired. Today, attorneys are receiving label contracts that expand that period to 10 or 15 years or more" (Knopper). Therefore, the terms in some of the newly formulated contracts demand that artists wait as long as fifteen years before they can re-record their music, which is exponentially longer than Taylor had to. Actions like these by such powerful individuals demonstrate nothing but pure greed and a desire to maintain the dominance or control that they believe they have over the artists that they manage, the work that they produce, and their voices, something that one should never be able to take away from another person.

Taylor Swift has disrupted the music industry in many ways throughout her career. However, her endeavors over the last four years have had such tremendous impacts and consequences for her career, other artists, and the music industry in general, that it is almost

impossible to deny her influence. Swift's re-recording journey has served to simultaneously anger record labels, influence other artists, and instill a sense of pride in her stolen music that she feared she had lost.

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